

Merton among the Doctors

Review of

Thomas Merton on Augustine, Jerome, and Ambrose:

The Philosophy of the Great Latin Fathers

By Thomas Merton (5 lectures on 3 CDs)

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Reviewed by **John E. Allard, OP**

Thomas Merton held that a monastic community, if its contemplative life were to survive and flourish, needed the benefit of ongoing learning and intellectual engagement with the written sources of its tradition. At least one person in the community ought to be active in such human learning (that is, in learning beyond the divine learning available in the Bible). Without the examination, thought and discussion that this engagement requires, Merton predicted that the life of monastic observances in the community would become empty. In saying all this, Merton responded to profound questions that monasticism itself has generated from its very beginnings about the value of human learning. He contended that the life of the mind provides a necessary means of sustenance for a contemplative life by way of considering and expanding one's human understanding of truths revealed by God.

Merton, as a novice master, instructed his novices in light of these convictions. They read material that was to serve as a point of departure for study, especially of a reflective sort. The purpose of such study was not for the novices to "enshrine" already highly acknowledged authors, but both to encounter the content of their writings and to notice the methods by means of which they approached their work. Merton remarked that, for Augustine and Patristic authors in general, the act of writing largely functioned as a direct extension of the act of thinking, such that only once in a while did the authors say something that summed up their argument or line of thought. All the more reason, then, for Merton's expectation that the novices needed to read reflectively and be open to their own critical responses to what they read.

The three discs of this collection, *Thomas Merton on Augustine, Jerome, and Ambrose*, contain Merton's conferences, or classroom presentations, on works by three of the Doctors of the early Latin Church: Augustine (354-430), Ambrose (c. 339-397) and Jerome (c. 345-419/420). Merton's aim in giving the talks was to provide prospective monks in their early training with an exposure to these three significant authors of the early Western Christian tradition. Each offered

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substantive reflections on important aspects of monastic life: the process of interpreting what one reads in Scripture (Augustine), the life of chastity (Ambrose), and the interior discipline of monitoring one's thoughts and directing them in love toward God (Jerome). Merton regarded them as tools with which a monk might work in developing an appropriate intellectual foundation for his life. Thus, the word "philosophy" in the subtitle of this collection denotes not an activity of cerebral abstraction, but a sustained process of thinking about issues that are pertinent to the nurture and development of a contemplative life.

Disc 1 contains a single talk in two parts: "Introduction" and "St. Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* (*De Doctrina Christiana*), Part I." On Disc 2 appears "St. Ambrose's Humanism: The Mystery of Silence and Virginity"; and "An Introduction to St. Jerome: *Caritas vs. Cupiditas*." With Disc 3, the work of the first disc continues with "St. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, Part II" and "St. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, Part III." (Merton omitted a discussion of Book IV of *De Doctrina Christiana*, which he regarded as largely a recapitulation of Cicero's rhetorical principles.) An unidentified announcer welcomes the listener and provides minimal information about the provenance of the conferences: they were delivered in the 1960s at the Abbey of Gethsemani to "novice monks." Merton's references to visits by Daniel Berrigan, SJ and Godfrey Diekmann, OSB, as well as to the successful space mission of two Russian cosmonauts, would allow a researcher to determine a more precise dating for the delivery of the talks to the summer of 1962.

The pattern of Merton's pedagogy (opening explanatory remarks about the material, followed by reading a portion of text, translating it, commenting, and then a mutual questioning and answering of students and teacher) may appear unremarkable, but there was clearly a lively atmosphere in the class. The presentations, moreover, included in-depth investigations of the material under discussion. In his treatment of *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book II, for example, Merton noted with approval Augustine's pastoral discussion concerning the difficulty encountered in reading and understanding Scripture. In addition to offsetting the reader's pride, the labor required to understand the Bible, like any struggle, brought joy and delight once the goal had been achieved. In presenting Book III, Merton asked what a reader is to make of Augustine's list of secular sciences and "profane letters," a series of topics that included arithmetic and history and that Augustine deemed useful. He reasoned that Augustine thereby signaled an openness to broad interests, such that the broader the interests, the greater the opportunity for a person to grow in understanding what God has revealed. Wherever a Christian finds truth, it belongs to God.

Yet Augustine understood that there was reason to exercise some caution. To what extent were signs, as they appear in the literature of secular authors, good or dangerous? Noxious signs, tied as they are to cupidity, possessed an evil character, a danger to the individual who might give oneself over to them. Thus, a reader needed to sort out the meaning of a literature and its signs accordingly. For Augustine, all knowledge of "pagan science" consisted of an understanding of signs, but the signs and our knowledge of them did not give one access to charity.

Near the conclusion of his discussion, Merton offered a criticism of Augustine. He found difficulty in Augustine's consistent application of the interpretive principle that a sign, if not literal, was then to be treated as figurative in meaning. The division into the literal and the figurative was, for Merton, too stark. Merton commented that, historically, as the signs of

Christianity became increasingly conventional, the more they became emptied of meaning. Thus, what was known as Christendom became a matter of convention, and commentators on Scripture ended up making Scripture mean what they wanted it to mean.

The sound quality of the CDs is remarkable for the clarity of Merton's voice. By contrast, the novices' questions and comments are occasionally too faint to hear easily, if at all. This is unfortunate but understandable in light of what one imagines to be the technological challenges to be negotiated in issuing these recordings, but it is less than satisfying when trying to follow the thread of discussion or to catch what prompted the good-natured laughter of the students from time to time. The voice-over announcements at the beginning of each talk seem intrusive when they block out portions of Merton's remarks before the lecture begins.

For a person interested in exploring Patristic thought from a monastic perspective, the conferences serve as a guide to a fruitful reading of some significant sources. The conferences on disc 2 on Ambrose, which particularly highlights his appreciative attitude toward women and his recognition of virginity as a liberation from the inferior status of women in pagan Roman society, and on Jerome, which actually focuses not on "*caritas vs. cupiditas*" as the title suggests but on Jerome's letters, whose force Merton sees in their focus on the role of Scripture as a remedy to cupidity (which the office of compline realizes for them on a daily basis), interrupt the sequence of talks devoted to Augustine on discs 1 and 3, but the listener nonetheless has an excellent opportunity to observe Merton at work in his role as a teacher. The monastic context of his teaching is evident: bells signal the time to move on to another activity of the monastic day, and Merton occasionally announces a change in schedule to accommodate other things happening in the life of the monastery. More significantly one can sense, as if at first-hand, the life that is engendered by a thoughtful consideration and discussion of Augustine, Ambrose and Jerome. Merton challenged the novices to encounter them, wrestle with their meaning, and take on the work of integrating their insights into the pursuit of their monastic vocation. The recordings easily convey what Merton held dear, namely, the value and high yield of such activity.